

School Choice Vouchers

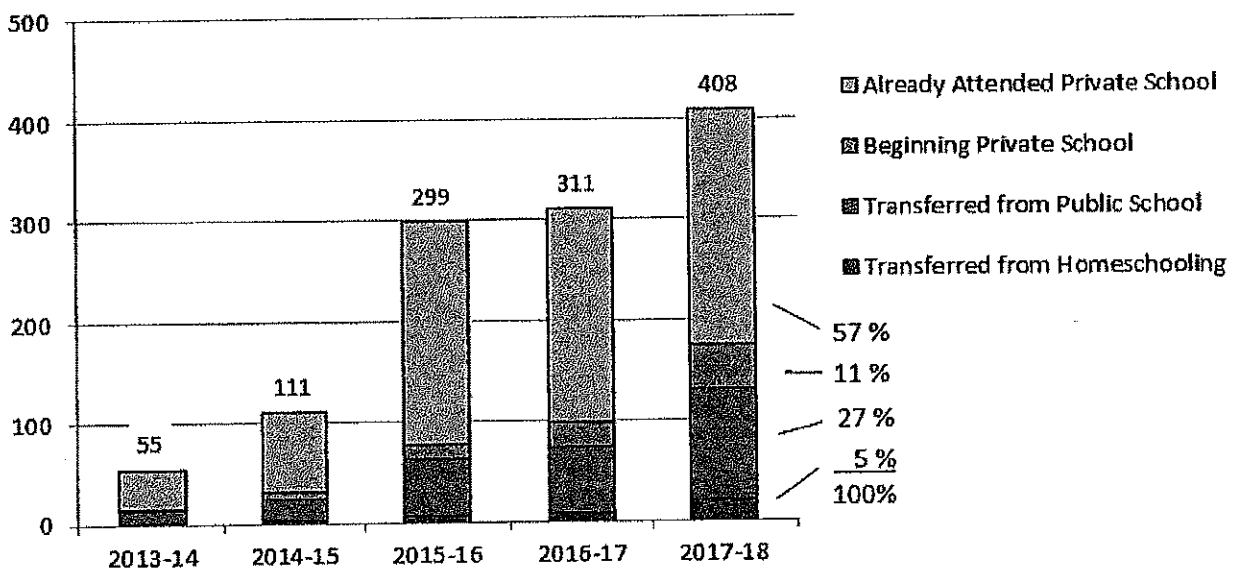
By Jim Bowman

Five years of school vouchers in the Fox Cities have cost taxpayers \$9,052,093. After two decades of research, studies suggest that vouchers do not improve student outcomes.

Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP)

For the 2017-18 school year, 408 school vouchers were issued for students to attend private schools in the Fox Cities. Fifty-seven percent of these students already attended a private school according to state-wide enrollment data and our estimates of attrition in the program. Four and five-year-old children used vouchers to begin private school. Other students transferred from a public school or home school.

**Number of Fox Cities Students with Vouchers
by Place of Origin**



School districts include Appleton, Kaukauna, Kimberly, Little Chute, Menasha and Neenah.

Fox Cities students with vouchers now constitute 13% of the combined enrollment of local private schools that seek WPCP students.

A school voucher is a certificate of government funding for a student at a private school chosen by the student's parents. Wisconsin school vouchers were first authorized in

Milwaukee in 1989. When the program was expanded state-wide in 2013, vouchers came to the Fox Cities.

The family income of voucher applicants must not exceed about \$52,000 per year for a family of four with married parents. For the 2017-18 school year, a voucher provides \$7,530 for K-8 students and \$8,176 for those in high school.

For 2017-18, the number of pupils residing in a school district who can receive vouchers is limited to 2% of the district's enrollment. This limit will increase by 1% each year until the limit reaches 10% of the district's enrollment. In the following year, the limit will be removed.

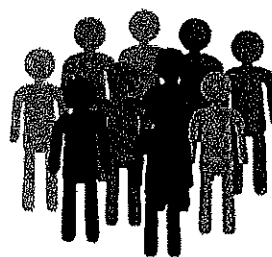
Effect on Student Outcomes

Twenty-seven percent of students with vouchers transfer from a public to private school. After decades of research, studies suggest that vouchers do not improve outcomes for these students.

To determine if vouchers improve student outcomes, researchers seek to compare the test scores of students who transferred from a public to a private school with the scores of comparable students who remained in a public school. To obtain a valid comparison, researchers try to:

1. Isolate the scores of the public-to-private transfer students (represented by the circled figure in the graphic). The private school population also typically includes students with a voucher who were already enrolled in the school, those who transferred from homeschooling, and those who are beginning kindergarten.

Public School



Private School



Private schools also have students who did not receive a voucher.

2. Eliminate bias. Bias occurs when students who transfer differ from students who did not transfer in ways that influence test scores. One source of bias, for example, is parenting. We know that effective parenting can improve student learning. We might believe that students who seek to transfer to a private school have parents who are more involved in their education. The scores of the transferring student, therefore, might exceed those of a comparable public school student because of parenting, not because of the private school.

Other causes of bias include poverty, race, and student disabilities.

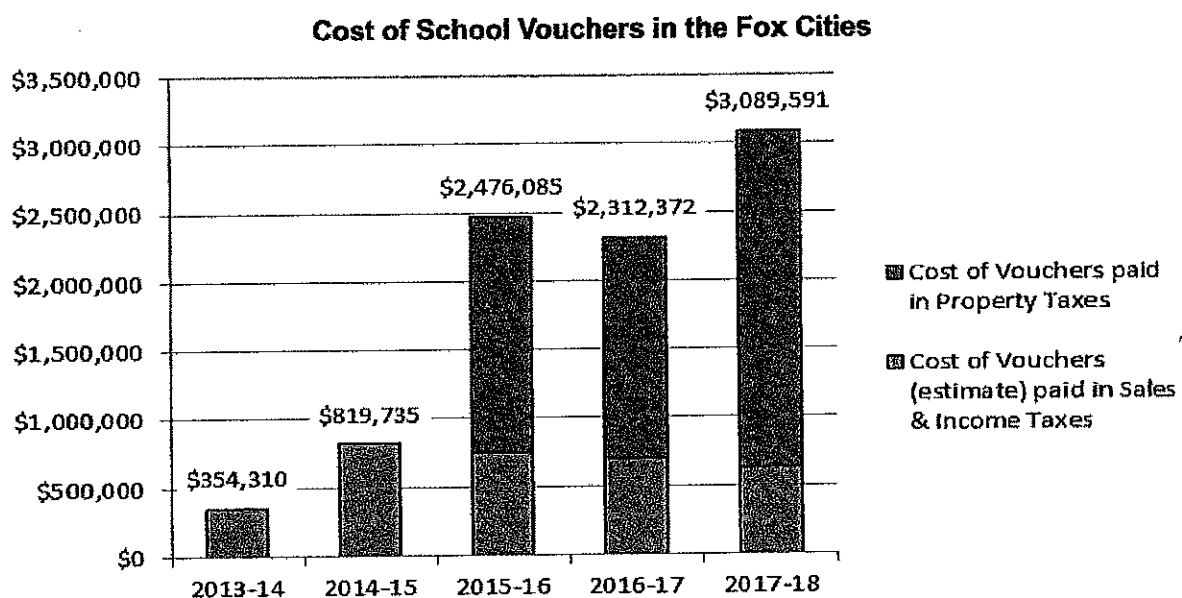
Assuming that researchers are able to isolate the scores of the desired population, they minimize bias by employing statistical techniques like correlation studies that “control” or take into account bias. If students are awarded vouchers by lottery, then a randomized control trial can be used.

A summary of seven frequently-referenced studies has been compiled. Four of the studies, conducted from 1998 to 2012, show limited support for vouchers. Students with vouchers in a Cleveland program received higher test scores at some private schools and lower scores at others. A New York City voucher program had positive impacts on test scores for African American students, but no impacts on scores for Latino students. A program in Washington DC produced no significant gains in reading and math but increased the probability of graduation. In Milwaukee, vouchers produced improvements in reading but not in math. Voucher students performed at higher levels in upper grades in reading and science but at lower levels in math and in 4th grade reading and science.

Three more recent studies, conducted in 2015 and 2016, show declines in academic achievement in voucher programs. Students in Louisiana lost ground in math, reading, science and social studies. Voucher students in Indiana scored lower on tests in reading and math. Ohio students with vouchers fared worse on state exams compared to their public school peers.

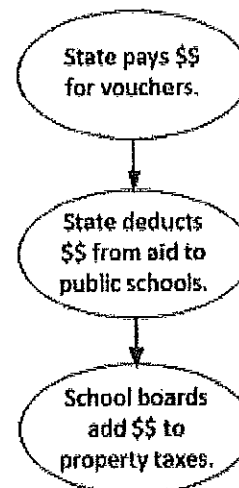
Effect on Taxes

Five years of school vouchers in the Fox Cities have cost taxpayers \$9,052,093.



For the first two years of the program, vouchers were paid from state general purpose revenues, which consist principally of sales and income taxes. In year 3 and thereafter, voucher payments are deducted from state general aid to public schools. School boards then pass on the cost to property taxpayers. School boards take this action to maintain the level of instruction provided to their students.

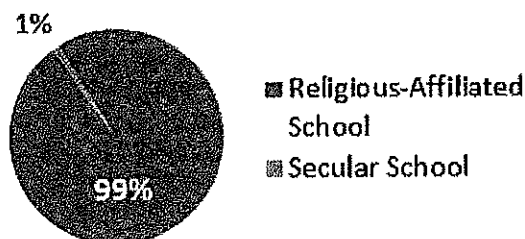
A school district's costs do not significantly decline with limited reductions in student enrollment. Consider, for example, an elementary school. If a first grader receives a voucher and transfers to a private school, the size of her class is reduced from 25 to 24 students. The cost of a set of textbooks will be avoided. Unchanged, however, are the costs of instruction, administration, student transportation, facility maintenance and food service. If 25 or so students transfer, if all are 1st graders and if all live in a school's neighborhood, then one educator position can be eliminated along with related costs in administration and transportation. This scenario rarely occurs.



Transferring a limited number of students out of a school district does not, therefore, significantly reduce cost. For every voucher student who transfers from a public to private school, taxpayers now pay twice. First, they pay the cost of providing an educational opportunity at a public school. Second, they pay for the voucher.

Public Funding for Religious Instruction

Ninety-nine percent of students in the WPCP use their vouchers to attend religious schools. Since parents can choose to opt their child out of religious activities, it's unclear how many of these students receive religious instruction.



The use of public funds for religious activities is controversial. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...*". A 2002 legal challenge to school vouchers in Ohio argued that government could, therefore, not pay tuition for students to attend religious schools. Both a federal district court and a Court of Appeals agreed. In a subsequent decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, however, a divided court ruled 5-4 that religious institutions were receiving public funds only through the choices of private citizens. Therefore, it is the individual people who receive the money for their children's education. The

majority opinion also stated, *"The Ohio program is entirely neutral with respect to religion..."*.

Many state constitutions have amendments that specifically forbid state funding of religious or sectarian education. Although the Wisconsin Constitution states that sectarian instruction is not allowed in public schools, it does not prohibit funding for the instruction in private schools.

You Can Support Fox Cities Public Schools

1. Urge your legislators to pause the statewide expansion of vouchers until accountability standards for all schools receiving taxpayer dollars are the same.
2. Support school choice without a public subsidy.

References for Charts

All charts are based on data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Bar chart: Number of Fox Cities Students with Vouchers (data on enrollment)

Bar chart: Number of Fox Cities Students with Vouchers by Place of Origin (data on distribution)

Bar chart: Cost of School Vouchers in the Fox Cities

Jim Bowman is a member of Fox Cities Advocates for Public Education. Send your comments to fca4pe@gmail.com.